

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?

Conference in Paris

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Amid the Napoleonic splendor of the *École Polytechnique* more than 100 scholars gathered to hear 21 papers on U.S. history, all crammed into four consecutive sessions, May 25-27, 1983. The question around which the meeting was organized, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" was itself enough to guarantee that the meeting would be haunted, not so much by the spirit of Werner Sombart as by that of Louis Hartz. Opening presentations by Seymour Martin Lipset and Pierre Birnbaum elaborated upon the theme that the absence of a feudal heritage in British North America had permitted an individualistic ethos to dominate the culture, and thus left no effective political space for socialism. Lipset's remarks raised a theoretical question which was never satisfactorily resolved by subsequent discussion: whether class conflicts in modern society are best explained by the workings of capitalism itself or by the influence of structural and ideological relics from previous epochs. In quite a different way, Birnbaum's paper made disturbingly evident to visitors from the U.S. that the Hartzian view of their country's history is firmly entrenched in French scholarship.

The remainder of the conference was largely devoted to a visible counter-attack against the opening theme. Eric Foner led the way by insisting that historical questions deserved answers based on precise analysis of actual developments, rather than timeless generalizations about culture. As if to second this idea, Edward

Countryman argued that the acquisitive individualism of the 1840s (the Hartzian norm) had won its commanding position at that time only by overcoming deeply rooted alternative values and traditions. Herbert Gutman expanded the attack by arguing that French historians needed to investigate the “bonds” that have linked individuals into discrete groups at specific times, and to grasp the impact that oppositional movements based on such bonds have had on the course of national development. Mari Jo Buhle illustrated the point with a discussion of diverse patterns of women’s activity in the socialist movement itself during a very fluid period of popular struggles. Leon Fink’s analysis of the roots of Socialist power in Milwaukee, David Montgomery’s paper on immigrants and social reconstruction after World War I, and studies of the influence of German immigrants on the working class they joined in the U.S. by Bruce Levine, Hartmut Keil and Dirk Hoerder, all served to redirect the discussion away from grand ideological generalizations and toward historical analysis. Provocative studies of American political processes, by Maurizio Vaudagna on the New Deal and by Ira Katznelson on the long-term separation of community and workplace struggles, also contributed to a discussion of the changing context of workers’ movements.

Other papers dealt with the realm of ideas. The history of the *Partisan Review* was examined by Laurent Césari, and that of *Dissent* by Diana Pinto. Victoria De Grazia reversed the coin, delineating the impact of American models of mass production and mass consumerism on European thinkers of the 1920s, especially Gramsci and DeMan. Marie-Christine Granjon offered a clear analysis of the action orientation of the New Left in its heyday, and Michael Harrington suggested where future action on behalf of socialism in America might be developed. Ronald Creagh drew attention to the importance of anarchism in the history of American radicalism. That thought was echoed by Hubert Perrier’s examination of the First International. His paper was a high point of the conference. Breaking persuasively with the intellectual categories (“Marxist” vs. “Lassalleian”) that have long hobbled discussions of the I.W.A. in America, Perrier insisted upon examining what participants in the International’s debates were actually saying.

Alan Dawley and Harry Zolberg concluded, though in quite different ways, that the discussion had buried “American exceptionalism” as a problem, and they invited participants to engage in other forms of international comparisons than those which simply contrasted European socialists to American pure and simple unionists. Although the gathering of scholars, which had been organized by the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, had proved to be stimulating and informative, the question to which it was formally addressed had not.